DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 400 003 JC 960 599

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TITLE	Community Colleges and Proprietary Schools. ERIC Digest.
INSTITUTION	ERIC Clearinghouse for Community Colleges, Los Angeles, CA.
SPONS AGENCY	Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED), Washington, DC.
REPORT NO	EDO-JC-97-01
PUB DATE	Sep 96
CONTRACT	RR93002003
NOTE	4p.; Drawn from "Community Colleges and Proprietary Schools: Conflict or Convergence? New Directions for Community Colleges Number 91," edited by Darrel A. Clowes and Elizabeth M. Hawthorne; see ED 387 193.
AVAILABLE FROM	ERIC Clearinghouse for Community Colleges, University of California at Los Angeles, 3051 Moore Hall, Los Angeles, CA 90095-1521.
PUB TYPE	Information Analyses - ERIC Clearinghouse Products (071)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	College Curriculum; College Role; *Community Colleges; *Educational Finance; *Educational Trends; *Institutional Mission; Organizational Objectives; Private Education; *Proprietary Schools; Student Costs; *Student Financial Aid; Two Year Colleges
IDENTIFIERS	ERIC Digests

ABSTRACT

There are clear advantages as well as disadvantages in encouraging greater mission convergence between community colleges and proprietary schools, such as for-profit vocational schools and career colleges. Proprietary schools have long attracted controversy related to their financial aid and fundraising practices, while at the same time fulfilling a clear community need by providing vocational programs promising quick preparation and transition to work. Similarities do exist between community colleges and proprietary schools, including curricula that emphasize post-graduate employment preparation and general education for traditional degrees and the diversity of their student populations. Strong differences are found, however, in governance and the distinction of public versus private status. Moreover, questions remain regarding differences in accreditation standards and the acceptance of proprietary school credits by other postsecondary institutions. When discussing the convergence of the two institutions, a distinction must be made between "organic" approaches (i.e., a result of the natural evolution of the institutions) and "forced" approaches (i.e., influenced by outside forces, such as the federal government through financial aid awards). The market-driven orientation of proprietary schools and the more diverse goals of community colleges present a formidable barrier to organic convergence, while low graduation and transfer rates of community colleges, a shifting focus in the community college curriculum, and increased public funding for students at proprietary schools indicate a movement towards a forced convergence. (TGI)

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U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

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Digest

September 1996 EDO-JC-97-01

Community Colleges and Proprietary Schools

by Lucy Lee

Should publicly supported community colleges and proprietary schools (including most for-profit vocational schools as well as two-year "career colleges") try to better understand one another? Some educators argue that policy and practice should emphasize the areas in which they are alike. Others contend that significant distinctions remain between the two types of postsecondary institutions. This *Digest* presents a discussion of some of the inherent advantages and disadvantages in encouraging greater mission convergence between community colleges and proprietary schools.

Clowes describes proprietary schools as the "silent partners" in higher education -- while little has been written about them, they enroll 6.1% of all postsecondary education students who are awarded a large share of federal grants and loans. These students have also been disproportionately responsible for loan defaults. Critics of today's proprietary schools echo many of the early concerns about the financial aid and fundraising practices historically associated with for-profit trade schools.

Historical Perspective on Proprietary Schools

Proprietary institutions have a long history of attracting controversy while at the same time filling a need in their communities. The 17th-century precursors of today's proprietary schools advertised to attract students to vocational programs that promised quick preparation and transition to work. For 200 years, their descendants operated independent of other forms of education in the United States. At the turn of the 20th century, however, the Progressive Era led to a focus on public education, accompanied by governmental reforms in education and the first efforts to regulate the private vocational schools.

Veterans enrolled in proprietary schools in record numbers after World War II, thanks to federal subsidies available on the G. I. Bill. Engaged in ever-more-aggressive advertising for students, the schools were accused of making educational goals subordinate to the bottom line. Scandals surrounding fraudulent accounting practices with regard to student aid in the 1950s served to further tarnish the reputation of the for-profit sector (Honick).

The rivalry between community colleges and proprietary schools surged with the post World War II boom in college attendance. Existing public institutions expanded their facilities, new campuses sprouted all over the country, and enrollments increased dramatically. As they faced new pressures to compete for students and financial aid, proprietary institutions were also increasingly targeted for criticism. During the last 50 years, efforts to coordinate oversight responsibility for the proprietary sector among the state higher education agencies, accrediting bodies, and the federal government have fallen short. Confusion remains about such fundamental issues as arriving at a common definition of the proprietary or "career" colleges (Chaloux). For example, as recently as 1994, the Carnegie Foundation's *A Classification of Institutions of Higher Education* combined "community, junior, and technical colleges (including proprietary schools)" into one category called "Associate of Arts Colleges."

Curriculum, Students, and Governance: Some Comparisons

Those who argue for mission convergence perceive increasing similarities in curricular offerings at proprietary schools and community colleges. The historic function of the proprietary school has shifted away from an exclusive emphasis on preparing students for post-graduate employment, toward offering courses that also emphasize general competencies. Community colleges, in their turn, have initiated curricular changes in response to students who are more interested in career preparation than traditional degrees (Hyslop and Parsons).

Student populations at both community colleges and proprietary schools are among the most diverse in the nation. Literature on the interaction of race, socioeconomic status (SES), and academic background of proprietary school versus community college students is contradictory. Referring to data from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), Cheng and Levin report that women and white students are somewhat more likely to enroll in career college than community college programs. Also, as parental income and education increase, so does the likelihood of attending a college or university rather than a propriety school or career college. Their study reveals that students attending proprietary schools appear to have lower degree aspirations but better success in actually attaining the license, certificate, or two-year degree they set out to pursue than do students with similar limited aspirations enrolled at community colleges. Nonetheless, evidence suggests that proprietary school students are far less likely to move on to baccalaureate study; the NCES data indicate that differences in the academic preparation and aptitude of proprietary students are factors. Prager also expresses concern that there are no guarantees that earned credit at a career college will be accepted by a community or senior college, a practice which might also inhibit transfer.

Some of the most fundamental differences between the two types of institutions exist in governance.

Obviously, the distinction of public versus private status remains significant. Nonetheless, events such as the G.I. Bill, amendments to the Higher Education Act of 1972 and 1992, changes in accreditation and standards, and fluctuations in the economy have prompted proprietary schools and community colleges to take on areas previously considered the exclusive domain of one or the other (Hittman).

Financing and Government Oversight

The not-for-profit, degree-granting schools have typically applied for regional accreditation, while for-profit, degree-granting schools have usually sought sanction by national accreditation associations. Prager holds that accreditation processes, though they vary across the different regional and national associations, now generally require that proprietary schools meet the same or similar standards as community colleges, while Chaloux says that evaluative criteria have differed for degree-granting and non-degree-granting institutions. Accreditation for degree-granting institutions has focused primarily on quality of the education, while that for the non-degree-granting has focused on employability of graduates.

Prager also notes that while accrediting standards merit further study with regard to all types of institutions, significant questions remain about policies regarding proprietary accreditation and its acceptance by other postsecondary institutions. She asks if accountability and outcome measures can be used to insure that greater numbers of students are admitted to and succeed in baccalaureate programs, regardless of where they begin their postsecondary training. Is loss of credit for proprietary school education upon transfer discouraging students who have attended proprietary schools from continuing their education in more traditional degree programs?

Convergence of Mission: Forced or Organic?

Moore presents a problematic scenario, arguing that the apparent convergence of community colleges and proprietary schools masks persistent, consequential differences. Moore outlines two approaches to what he terms the "illusion of convergence," defining it as either "organic" or "forced." He describes the "organic convergence hypothesis" as the presumption that the boundaries between community colleges and proprietary schools are becoming blurred as part of a natural evolution. "Forced convergence" is influenced primarily by the federal role in awarding student financial aid. Nearly 80% of proprietary school students receive aid, as opposed to 29% of all students. The boom in proprietary schools in the 1970s and '80s was followed by reduced access to federal funds for schools with high default rates. Efforts to improve student loan default rates have required that proprietary schools behave more like community colleges, a forced convergence.

The fundamental differences between proprietary schools and community colleges – in size, cost, mission, governance, time to program completion, links to the rest of higher education, and market orientation – present a formidable barrier to any natural convergence, according to Moore. He mentions that proprietary schools will always be motivated by market-driven ends, while community colleges will always have more diverse and complex goals. Hawthorne agrees that any shift toward convergence, since it has been prompted primarily by external forces, cannot be viewed as a true merging of mission.

Nonetheless, Clowes points out several ways in which community colleges and proprietary schools are growing more alike. Low graduation and transfer rates raise doubts about the validity of distinguishing community colleges by their degree-granting function. Similarly, community colleges can no longer claim that the general education focus remains at the heart of their curricula, in distinct contrast to that of proprietary schools. Presumed differences in organizational culture are not evident from the existing research and funding differences have faded as proprietary school students receive more public monies via grants and loans. Also, both sectors face increasing pressure to develop innovative methods of evaluating the effectiveness and quality of programs that deliver education through new technology (Chaloux).

Conclusion

Public community colleges and proprietary schools have been profoundly affected by changes in student demographics, the climate of federal and state support, accreditation policies, and advancing technology. Current research suggests, however, that the apparent movement toward greater similarity in mission and practice at community colleges and proprietary schools has not, thus far, produced any definitive commitment toward cooperation, or, conversely, clearer differentiation of mission. A major obstacle to greater convergence of mission may be the academic establishment's philosophical bias, which resists any equating of for-profit vocational schools with public higher education institutions. However, the long tradition of proprietary schools in the United States, as well as their increasing influence, should prompt a closer examination of this under-studied segment of our diverse higher education system.

References

This Digest is drawn from *New Directions for Community Colleges*, Number 91, edited by Darrel A. Clowes and Elizabeth M. Hawthorne, published in Fall, 1995: "Community Colleges and Proprietary Schools: Conflict or Convergence?" The cited articles include: "State Oversight of the Proprietary Sector," by Bruce N. Chaloux; "Who are the Students at Community Colleges and Proprietary Schools?" by Xing David Cheng and Bernard H. Levin; "Community College and Proprietary Schools: Conflict or Convergence?" by Darrel A. Clowes; "Proprietary Schools and Community Colleges: The Next Chapter," by Elizabeth M. Hawthorne; "Changes in Mission, Governance, and Funding of Proprietary Postsecondary Institutions," by Jon A. Hittman; "The Story Behind Proprietary Schools in the United States," by Craig A. Honick; "Curriculum as a Path to Convergence," by Cheryl Hyslop and Michael H. Parsons; "The Illusion of Convergence: Federal Student Aid Policy in Community Colleges and Proprietary Schools," by Richard W. Moore; and "Ties that Bind: Default, Accreditation, and Articulation," by Carolyn Prager.

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